

Public Transit Loses to Polluters in Climate Bill Subsidies

By [Mike Lillis](#) 7/8/09 6:00 AM



As Senate lawmakers launch new efforts to curb the nation's greenhouse gas emissions, some key members have joined local transportation officials and environmentalists to ask a seemingly relevant question: Where's the commitment to public transit?

House lawmakers last month passed a proposal designed to tackle climate change by creating a cap-and-trade system to limit greenhouse emissions and generate revenues for green initiatives. Yet — while billions of dollars went to subsidize the transition of the major polluting industries into the new system — only one percent was dedicated to public transportation projects.



Illustration by: Matt Mahurin

That arrangement, many experts and lawmakers contend, falls well short of what the country will need to reduce the vehicle miles that contribute so heavily to the world's greenhouse emissions. Indeed, the United States, which represents roughly 5 percent of the world's population, emits more than one-fifth of its greenhouse gases — with 28 percent coming from transportation.

Now, as Senate Democrats are preparing to unveil their own sweeping climate-change proposal, a growing chorus of voices is calling for an increase in public-transit funding to eliminate the need for so much additional driving.

“Transportation accounts for nearly one-third of our emissions, and yet it does not appear to be on Congress’s radar screen as one third of the solution,” Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.), chairman of the Senate Banking Committee’s subpanel on transportation, said during a hearing on the topic Tuesday. A failure to provide more funding for clean transit, Menendez added, would represent a failure to tackle climate change adequately.

He has a difficult road ahead. While the House passed its climate bill last month, Senate approval is much less certain. Not only would Democratic supporters need to rally the 60 votes required to defeat a Republican filibuster, but the legislative calendar is already being squeezed by a looming debate over health care reform that’s certain to be long-drawn. Many observers question whether there will be time left to tackle another proposal as controversial as the cap-and-trade legislation.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration is urging Congress to abandon thoughts of a new transportation bill this year, which would offer another avenue for new public transit funding. Instead, the administration is pushing for an 18-month extension of the current funding blueprint.

Not that Washington policymakers have done nothing to tackle transportation-related emissions this year. In May, the Obama administration adopted new regulations forcing automakers to increase the fuel efficiencies of new vehicles nationwide. That, experts contend, is a step in the right direction, but it won’t alone address the problem of carbon emissions if the volume of traffic increases simultaneously.

Michael Replogle, founder of the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, told lawmakers Tuesday that, even as cars have become more efficient and fuels cleaner in recent decades, greenhouse gas emissions related to transportation have grown steadily over the same span.

“Our current policy framework guiding the development of surface transportation infrastructure in the U.S. is not designed to take into account [greenhouse gas] emissions,” Replogle said.

The comments came on the same day that the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, headed by Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), held a climate-change hearing of its own. Boxer is currently crafting legislation to accompany the House-passed bill. Yet, as Menendez was quick to point out, Tuesday’s EPW gathering featured officials from the departments of Energy, Agriculture, Interior and the Environmental Protection Agency, but no one from the Department of Transportation.

Ignoring mass transit solutions, according to many experts, is an oversight that could vastly limit the emission-reducing capabilities of whatever proposal eventually comes out of Boxer’s committee.

Clinton Andrews, professor of urban policy at Rutgers University, told lawmakers Tuesday that, according to a recent New Jersey study he conducted, per capita greenhouse emissions decrease between 10 and 15 percent in places where residents have access to rail service — figures that increase as population densities do also. Lawmakers hoping to tackle climate change, he said, will be hard-pressed to do so without committing greater resources to similar projects.

“The problem of global warming is large enough that it requires sustained efforts on multiple fronts,” Andrews said, “and transit is definitely one of those fronts.”

Not that Tuesday’s debate was all one-sided. Randal O’Toole, a fellow at the Cato Institute, told lawmakers that decades worth of public transit funding has done nothing to convince Americans to give up their cars. Public transit agencies, he said, “tend to build urban monuments” that can’t survive without government subsidies. Instead, O’Toole argued, Congress should concentrate on reducing emissions from cars and trucks.

“Transit is going to be the culprit,” O’Toole said, “not the savior.”

Menendez countered by pointing out that the last transportation bill Congress approved contained \$200 billion for highway construction.

“That’s a subsidy,” Menendez said, “but we don’t seem to think of it in that respect.”

The House approved its climate change bill at the end of last month by a slim margin of 219 to 212, with 44 Democrats voting against the bill. But passage didn’t come without first offering billions of dollars to help some of

the country's biggest polluters adapt to the new pollution limits. Indeed, under the bill's cap-and-trade system, 15 percent of the value of the emission allowances would go initially to industries like steel and paper, 5 percent to coal-burning power plants and 4 percent to oil refineries and electric utilities. Public transit projects, meanwhile, would get 1 percent, or roughly \$537 million.

The original proposal, sponsored by Reps. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) and Edward Markey (D-Mass.), contained no money for low-carbon public transit at all. The 1-percent provision was added at the last minute after negotiations with Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.), who introduced legislation earlier in the year that would allocate 10 percent of emission-cap revenues to public transit.

Blumenauer spokeswoman Erin Allweiss said Tuesday that the 10-percent proposal remains very much alive.

Some experts caution, however, that dumping money into public transit without also adopting complementary land-use strategies will do little to reduce either urban congestion or greenhouse gas emissions. The reason is simple: A bus that caters to a sprawling cul-de-sac community won't carry nearly the number of passengers as the same bus traveling to areas of higher-density. And a bus with empty seats is even more inefficient than a car with the same.

Christopher Cabaldon, mayor of the City of West Sacramento, warned lawmakers that comprehensive planning is vital. If public transit doesn't arrive before communities and businesses are well established, he said, the strategy is sure to fail.

"If you don't have the transit, people get used to cars and they demand ... that you start building more parking lots," Cabaldon said. "The changes that you want to achieve cannot be done by building the transit afterwards."